Helping Students Stay in English

By Leslie Bobb Wolfe (Spain)

In most state school classrooms around the world we have large groups of students who speak the same mother tongue. If we want these students to get practice in the oral skills, the most common solution is to dedicate a large proportion of class time to working in pairs or small groups. However, one of the main drawbacks of this arrangement is that, since the majority of the students at any given time are working without direct teacher supervision, the decision as to which language they use to work in is theirs-and they often go into their own language rather than struggle to communicate in English.

The least successful way, in my experience, to get students to use as much English as possible is for me (the teacher) to tell (ask, shout at, beg, etc.) the class to use English. I've found that to be pretty much a waste of breath and energy, because whether or not English is used is a decision each student makes. There is no way I can know in a class of 20 students (much less of 40, 50, 60, etc.) that they are using as much English as possible if I have them working in pairs or small groups. If I try to take the responsibility for their using as much English as possible, all I'll probably achieve is to drive myself crazy and get the students to put their creativity into finding new ways to avoid using English without my catching them. What I have discovered that does work is certain "tricks" to get my students to want to use as much English as possible, taking the responsibility of that decision themselves.

The Three Questions

The "trick" I like to use first with a class is to ask them three questions after they have finished a small-group activity (having chosen an activity at a level in which I know they can work mostly in English). I ask the students to write their answers individually, not say them aloud or show them to any other student or to me. (The first time I insist on this quite a bit, in a kind of teasing tone: "I'm going to ask you three questions, but I don't want you to tell me the answer. Just write it, and don't let anyone else see your answer.") The first question is: How much English did you use during the activity? The answer should be a percentage, a number: 10%, 50%, etc. I say, "Just think how much English you used and write the number, please."

The second question is: How much English could you have used? Again I ask for a written percentage and mention that 100% isn't always realistic. There tends to be some nervous giggling at this point. Before asking the third question, I say that this one is just to think about, not to write anything. It is: What could you do in the future to have the first number move nearer to the second one? (I ask the three questions in English or in the students' language, depending on their level.)

My objective in asking these questions is to put the responsibility for using English onto each student. They know that in English class they should use as much English as possible, but timidity, rebelliousness, peer pressure, etc., can impede their doing so. If the teacher accepts the

responsibility for keeping the students in English, students can "play" at using as little English as possible. The above questions, asked in a neutral, not angry or accusing, tone of voice and with corresponding body language, show the students that the decision is theirs. They tend to respond over time by using more English, as much as they can.

Closely related to the first "trick" are the following, which I incorporate gradually after using the one described above two or three times: Before starting an activity, I say that when it is finished I will ask for percentages of English (the above three questions). Or, again before starting an activity, I ask each student or small group to write the percentage of English they think they can use. And then after the activity, I ask them how well they've been able to fulfill their goal, whether they could improve, whether they were too optimistic, etc. And finally, once in a while with some groups and not until all the above have been used more than once, after an activity I ask the students to either write their percentages on a paper to give me or to say them aloud.

Little Messages

While the students are working in small groups, sometimes I write little messages on the board concerning the language they're using: something like "Are you using English?" I write this in rather large print and then walk around the class simply tapping one person in each group on the shoulder and pointing to the board. I don't say anything, just tap and point and go on to another group. A variation I've seen another teacher (Manuel Gonzalez, Teachers' Centre, Leon) use is to write the message in large letters on a piece of paper and walk around the groups silently showing the paper to each group.

The message can be more or less complex, depending on the groups' general level. Other examples are: What language are you using, English or Spanish? How much of what you're saying is in English? I don't hear any "funny" language, do I?

Classroom Language

Many times students use their own language because they're not sure or don't remember how to express the idea in English. In these cases, my job is to find out what they need and make sure they have it to use.

While the students are working in small groups, I walk around (as unobtrusively as possible) listening to what they're saying in their own language and write this on the board in English. Often much of what I hear is classroom language that will be used over and over again. I either simply write the sentences on the board in English and walk around pointing them out to the class (as described above), stop the small-group work and point them out to the class, or write the sentences on the board in their own language, stop the groups, and ask them to help me put them into English before going on. Depending on my own energy level and quickness of mind on any given day, I may ask students to write these sentences in their notebooks, keeping a record of them to use on future occasions. This probably should be done systematically.

Another related possibility is to ask the class, before starting an activity, what sentences they think they will need while doing it. Asked like this in the abstract, I've found it difficult for students at first to think of what they'll be wanting to say. With time and practice they learn how to think this out. For some activities it's quite obvious. For instance, filling in a questionnaire for which they need to ask their classmates questions, we go over what the questions will be before starting. I usually ask the students not to write the questions themselves. For lower-intermediate levels, we often write the questions on the board- different students voluntarily write and/or correct what's on the board. This means that the students have the questions written somewhere if they need to refer to them, but it's not a little piece of paper in their hands that they'll mumble into instead of looking at the other person.

Observers

An idea that I didn't use much myself at secondary-school levels but which other teachers have told me is very successful for them is to ask one person from each group, or a specific group of students, to act as observers. The observers do not participate in the activity itself but keep track of what's being said and report back afterward.

Since I started at university level I have used this "trick" more, and the students have reported back that they've found it useful. Rather than putting an emphasis on whether or not English is used, each observer has an oral-assessment sheet and listens for pronunciation and grammar mistakes, interaction, and overall fluency skills of each member of the group. In fact, quite often I plan an activity for 20 minutes, have the students work in groups of four, and ask each member of the group to take a turn being the observer-monitor for five minutes. All I do is signal when to change observer every five minutes. At the end of the total time, I ask each student, on the same evaluation sheet, to self-assess her/his own speaking performance (3-4 minutes) and then give the small groups another 10 to 15 minutes to comment on their mutual assessments person by person (everyone will have evaluated everyone else and themselves).

Students have told me in written feedback that although at first they found it difficult to drop out of a conversation and listen for how their classmates were speaking rather then what they were saying-and to listen for specific mistakes-after practicing a few times not only did their ears sharpen to hear others' mistakes but this helped them to realize specific areas they themselves needed work on.

There's no way I can physically put much time into listening to each student in a class of 30 to 50 people (which, of course, means eight to fifteen small groups). But they can learn to do it themselves. Here, for me, is a good example of how students can learn from each other and, through this, get to working on self-improvement. And this takes me back to the idea of students taking the responsibility for their own learning to the degree that they are able.

For me this is the common factor in all these "tricks." The responsibility of using as much English as possible is on the students, which, in my opinion, is where it should be.

A Useful List

Here are the same “tricks” organized according to when I use them in relation to what the class is doing.

1. Before beginning an activity:

a. Ask each student or group to write the percentage of English s/he thinks s/he can use during the activity.

b. Say that when this activity is finished you will ask for percentages of English. (See below.)

c. Ask the class what structures they think they’ll need to do the activity (i.e., How will you say . . . ?).

2. During the activity:

a. Listen to the sentences the groups say in their own language and write these on the blackboard in English. (For example: It’s my turn. I don’t understand. Wait a minute.)

b. Write little messages on the blackboard about the use of English. (For example: How much English are you using? Are you using English? Are you speaking English or Spanish? What language are you using?)

c. Have one person from each group go to another group and make a mark each time non-English is used-or perhaps do so for each person in the group individually. I meet briefly with these people and explain that each should: (1) sit outside or behind the group, (2) not participate in the activity, and (3) not explain to the group what s/he is doing. (They’ll figure it out, but it’s more intriguing this way.)

d. Go to a specific group and quietly suggest that they try using more English.

3. After finishing an activity:

a. Ask each student or group to write the percentage of English they’ve used during the activity. Then ask them to write the percentage of English they could have used. Finally, ask each to think about what s/he could do in the future to have the first percentage move nearer to the second.

b. When small groups before an activity have written the percentage of English they think they’ll use, ask them if this percentage has been fulfilled or not.

c. Ask observers to comment on their notes with the small group.

d. Ask the class what they’ve said in their language during the activity, to get the English version for the next time.

e. Ask students to say their percentages aloud or to write them on the papers they give you.